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Volume VII *Number 6*

The TOWN of SUFFIELD
Connecticut

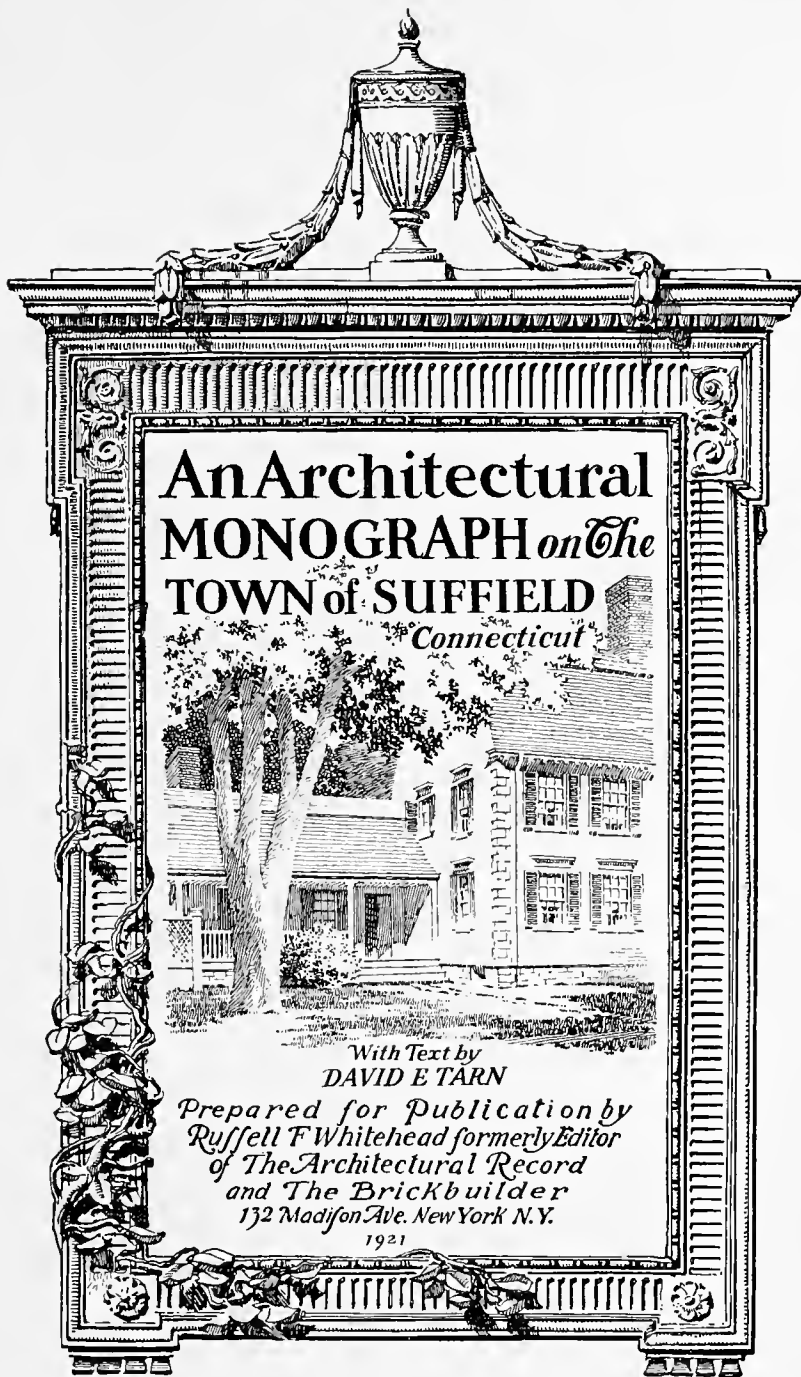
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David E Tarn

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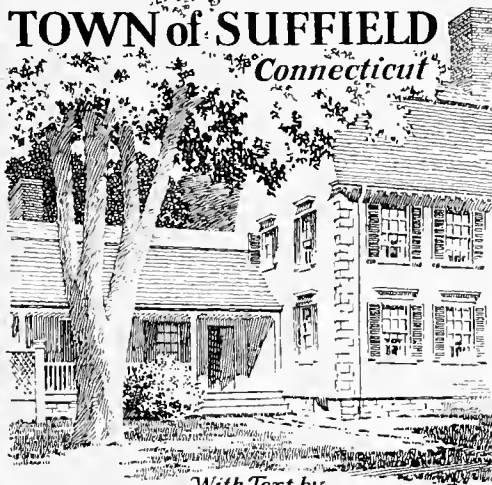
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An Architectural
MONOGRAPH *on The*
TOWN of SUFFIELD
Connecticut



With Text by
DAVID E TARN

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HOUSE AT SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT. Detail of Doorway.

The WHITE PINE SERIES of ARCHITECTURAL MONOGRAPHS

A BI-MONTHLY PUBLICATION SUGGESTING THE
ARCHITECTURAL USES OF WHITE PINE AND ITS
AVAILABILITY TODAY AS A STRUCTURAL WOOD

Vol. VII

DECEMBER, 1921

No. 6

THE TOWN OF SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT

By DAVID E. TARN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KENNETH CLARK

THE villages and towns of New England, elm-shaded, with glimpses of white houses through the green, seem always to have deep roots in our national traditions and consciousness. And New England, too, has associations even more intimate in the minds of most of us, for there are few American families who cannot trace an ancestor who came from a village or town of New England. There is a spirit, certainly, of these early settlers which has widely affected our whole national temperament; New England is our point of departure, no matter how far from its elm-shaded streets many ambitious pioneers have moved and settled.

And it is New England that gives us, as the symbol and type of the American home, the old, familiar "white house with the green blinds." Regardless of the many and varied kinds of houses we build, to satisfy architectural whims, that early tradition of the "white house with the green blinds" is never entirely absent from our thoughts or from our instinctive desires.

New England possesses, in a subtle but compelling way, a complete difference from any other part of the country. Although its spirit is manifest in our national temperament, and in much of our national instinct, New England lies very definitely on the Connecticut side of a State line and New York on the other. The demarcation is almost as distinct as the difference in color on the map.

In Connecticut there are many quiet inland villages and towns which easily escape discovery by the architectural explorer. They are off the beaten track, and have none of the wide familiarity of the well known seaport towns and much visited inland places of Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

Driving from Hartford to Springfield, follow-

ing the Connecticut River northward, and north from Windsor Locks, the road will run through the old town of Suffield, which was founded in 1670. Proud of its Pilgrim pedigree, the people of Suffield produced an elaborate historical pageant in October, 1920, in commemoration of the settlement, and recalled the dauntless band of Pilgrims who came from Leyden in Holland, whither they had fled to escape persecution in England. Their leader, Major Pynchon, bought the land for the settlement for thirty pounds from the local Indian chieftain, Pampunkshat, and the first Suffield Town Meeting was held in 1682.

A typical bit of New England history, this brief chronicle of the achievement of a group of determined colonists, who turned a wilderness into a town in less than twelve years. They wrought industriously and untiringly with their hands, and must have possessed a will to survive and to progress almost unbelievable in our present era of easy methods and ready-made necessities.

And what, besides their share of colonizing New England and their share in the immortal spirit of New England, did they leave for us to look upon to-day?

The first houses, of course, have disappeared, replaced by their builders and their children as prosperity increased and the struggle for mere existence became less engrossing. One of the oldest houses in Suffield is the Gay Manse, which bears the date 1742, a sturdy, gambrel-roofed house of the old New England type that followed those earliest ones, in which sharply pointed roof and overhanging second story were features brought directly over from Elizabethan England. Few of that earliest type remain, and relatively few of the first gambrel-roofed New

England houses such as this relic of old Suffield.

The Gay Manse is an unusually good example of its type, in proportion, in the contour of its roof, and in the spirit of its detail. The doorway, surmounted by a broken cyma pediment, is in admirable scale with the entire building, and, as a study by itself, reveals no less nicety of scale in its mouldings and parts. The incised "stone joints" of the jambs and lintels suggest the manner of the old State House in Newport, Rhode Island, as well as the graceful pediment, and it is by no means improbable that Newport may have been the source of inspiration. It is even possible that the pilasters, pediments, and mouldings may have been made in Newport, for there were many skilled woodworkers there whose doorways and mantels are found throughout Rhode Island. Be its origin what it may, it is a fine doorway, perhaps the most perfect, architecturally, in all Suffield.

Along the shaded main street there stands another gambrel-

roofed house, known to have been built about 1736 by Captain Abraham Burbank. It is a little more pretentious than the old Gay Manse, more elaborate in its detail. It has wooden quoins after the manner of many of the finer houses of Salem and Newport. The main cornice is elaborated with block modillions and the first-story window-heads are elaborated with a moulded entablature, with dentils, and a convex frieze. Two entrances afford further opportunity for studying detail. The first is a plain pediment porch, on Tuscan columns, with a triglyph frieze, apparently older than the entrance in the wing, which has a pediment over

a fanlight, on Composite columns and side lights. The treatment of the entablature of this second door, however, is identical with that of the windows, which contradicts to some extent the theory of its later date. The entablature, of course, could have been copied, or, if both doors actually were built at the same time, there is nothing in precedent to say that it would have been impossible for one to have been designed

with Tuscan and the other with Composite columns.

The wing to the left is apparently a later addition, but even the Dutch Colonial appearance of its roof does not detract from the essentially New England look of the Burbank house. It is a typical example of its style, conservative, dignified, and very expressive of simple domesticity.

The third gambrel-roofed house illustrated is the Thomas Archer Place, built about 1795. It is a far more modest affair than the Burbank house, but offers a considerable architectural enigma. The location of the two doors by no means suggests a ra-

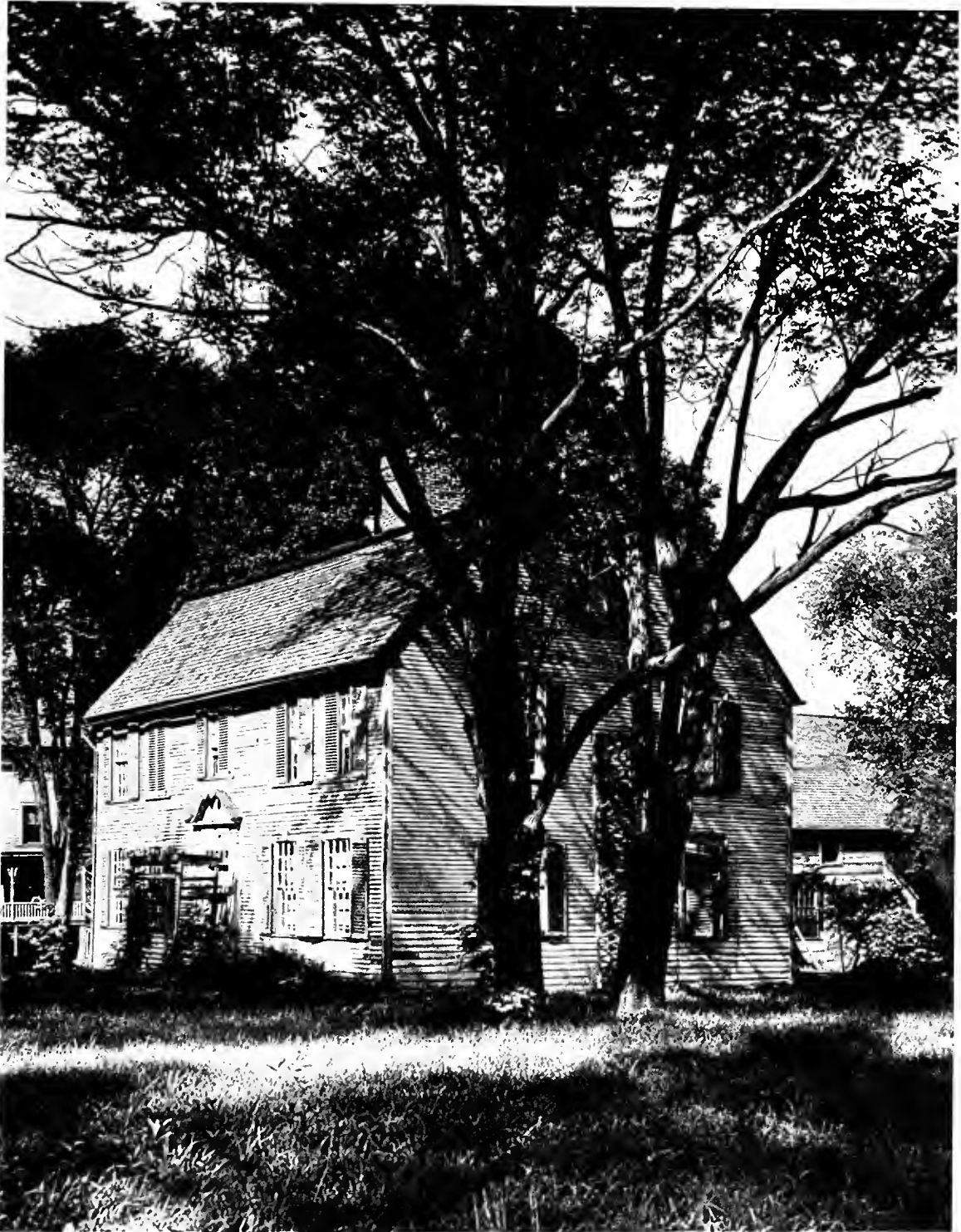
tional plan within, and the doors themselves seem to be a part of some much more pretentious house. The door on the end with no steps or approach, or any other apparent reason for being so strangely placed, is in itself a distinguished piece of design, beautiful in detail and exceptionally fine in proportion. The entablature of this doorway, as well as that of the windows, is very similar to the window entablature of the Burbank house, and its date of building must fall nearly in the same year.

Another half-century saw marked differences in the Suffield citizens' idea of a suitable house. Again the name of "Gay," this time in the local



Detail of Doorway.

THE GAY MANSE, SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.



THE GAY MANSE, SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT. Built in 1742.



Detail of Window.
THE GAY MANSE,
SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.

designation of "Gay Mansion," built by Ebenezer King in 1795. Much more sophistication is evident; the builder was by no means unfamiliar with the "grand houses" of Salem and Newburyport.

An architrave and frieze make, with the cornice, a complete entablature, which carries around the building, and tall paneled pilasters, two stories high, support it. The main evidence of a greater sophistication is seen in the Palladian window, which was evidently so highly regarded by the builder that he was inspired to somewhat destroy its scale and importance as a feature by making a very much smaller one in the pediment, where there was only room for a fanlight. Both entrances are very like the second doorway of the Burbank house, and there is also practically an identity in the architraves of the windows on the first floor. This whole house, substantially four-square and dignified, is "New England" architecturally personified.

A third type of roof is seen in the Captain Phelps house, also built in 1795. It is the plain "barn roof," the characteristic Connecticut roof, of which so many are to be seen in Litchfield and elsewhere throughout the State. The Phelps house acquires dignity by means of

the tall corner pilasters, and centers its architectural interest mainly in its porch and Palladian window. The porch is a simple Ionic one, with interesting mouldings in its entablature and pediment. The Burbank house would seem to have set a style in window-heads, for here, again, are the same convex frieze and the same mouldings.

The Charles Shepard house is distinguished by its very graceful porch, of which the balustrade, however, would appear to be a later addition. The general proportions of this house, and especially the pitch of the roof, are distinctly of Connecticut.

Another interesting house (again with the Burbank house window-heads) shows a quaint delusion on the part of its builder, who evidently believed that if one porch is desirable, two would be doubly so, which led him to pile one on top of the other. The effect is not a happy one, and destroys the unity which the street front would have if the builder had not been so mistakenly profuse. This house, built by Harvey Bissell in 1815, eighty years after the Burbank house, also has rusticated wooden quoins, and, as above mentioned, the same win-

(Text continued on page ten)



Detail of Window.
THE HARVEY BISSELL HOUSE,
SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.

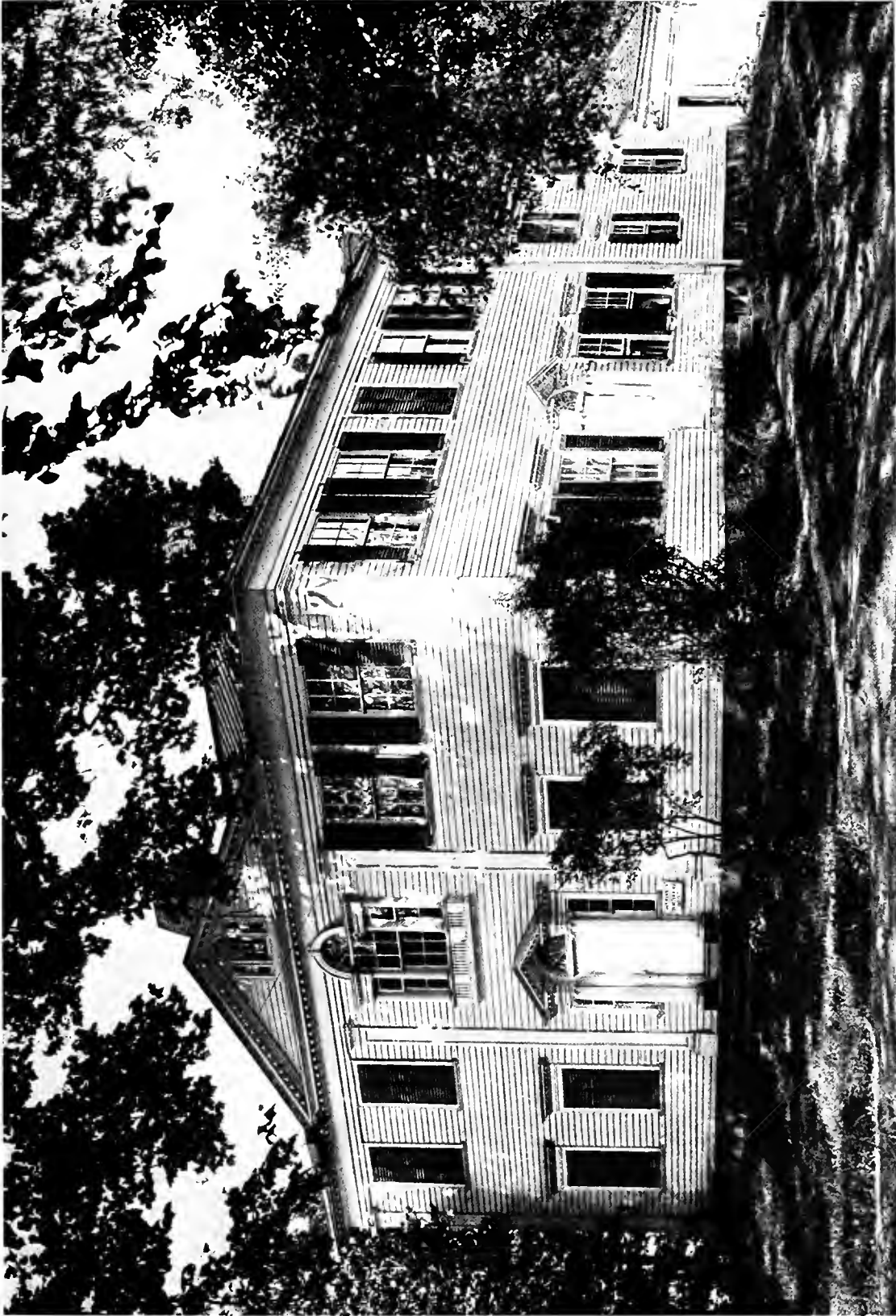


THE THOMAS ARCHER PLACE, SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.

Known to have been lived in by Thomas Archer in 1795.



THE CAPTAIN ABRAHAM BURBANK HOUSE, SUTFIELD, CONNECTICUT. Built about 1736.

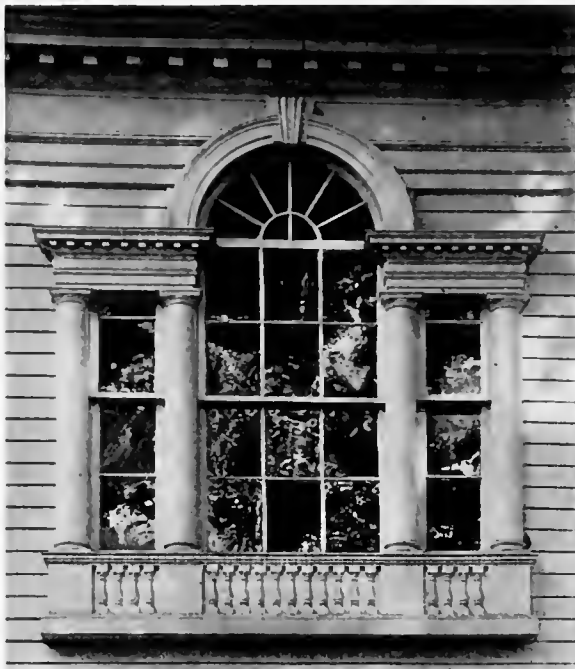


"THE GAY MANSION," SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT. Built by Ebenezer King in 1795.

dow-heads. The portecochère at the left is very evidently an addition of the "Chamfered Corner" period of the '80's. In 1812 gambrel roofs had given place to the plain "barn roof," but the device of carrying the clapboard side walls down to the grade with no foundation exposed is a much earlier and very characteristic New England custom.

There is an interesting quality in nearly all the early houses of Connecticut which differentiates them from those of other parts of New England, especially from the Massachusetts houses near Boston and the Rhode Island houses near Newport and Providence. The early Connecticut builders were very unsophisticated, and worked with far less actual knowledge of architectural detail than many of their contemporaries elsewhere. It is easy, for this reason, to find many mistakes and solecisms, but these seem more often to add interest to than to detract from their work.

Architecture in the United States enjoyed, in its early days, certain advantages which do not exist to-day. Natural limitations of stylistic influence existed, and while many may think of Colonial and early American builders as de-



Palladian Window.

THE GAY MANSION, SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.

prived of the many sources of inspiration which are available in this age of photography and printing, they are to be congratulated on having less distraction. The very limitations of their architectural knowledge made for a fundamental quality of consistency in their works.

A relative limitation which further aided the consistency of builders' and architects' work in the early days of this country lay in the natural limitations of manufacturing mouldings and ornamental detail. Similarity of ideals and the primitive state of mill machinery made for a

natural simplicity which to-day is only the result of conscious study and effort. To-day we try to keep our detail simple by referring back to early American work; the early American architect, who was also carpenter and builder, kept his detail simple because he did not know any other kind, and could not have gotten it made if he had known.

Practically every detail was derived from one of the few available books of the time, and these books, for the most part, contained only good and consistent Georgian details. It is interesting to notice in many



Front Entrance.

THE GAY MANSION, SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.



THE HARVEY BISSELL HOUSE, SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.
Built about 1815



THE CHARLES SHEPARD HOUSE, SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.
Built in 1824.



Porch Detail,
THE HARVEY BISSELL HOUSE,
SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.

New England towns how successive builders conferred the highest form of flattery upon neighbors and fellow-townsmen by imitating some detail which seemed attractive. The treatment of windows in the town of Suffield will be observed from the illustrations to show this imitative tendency. Whether executed by the same builder or by different builders, it is apparent that a good piece of detail was appreciated and duplicated in successive houses.

There were stylistic fads in those days, too, but they differed from our stylistic fads in that they came in waves, and not all at once, as ours do. There was, for instance, the Classic Revival, also called the "American Empire," style, which came in after 1812—but the architects, builders, and owners in early American days did not have to worry about Italian villas, French châteaux, English country houses, and California Mission houses all at the same time. They concerned themselves only with the thing that was engaging popular fancy at the time, and even more often they concerned themselves only

with immediate local precedent. It is this latter circumstance that makes the old New England village what it is—a page of architectural history rather than a page out of an architectural scrap-book.

Besides the natural similarity in stylistic inspiration in the average New England village, their charming consistency was further aided by a general similarity in building materials, and the difficulty of securing materials alien to the immediate locality.

Several considerations other than its wide availability made white pine one of the most extensively used of early American building materials. The ease with which white pine can be worked, run in mouldings, and carved made it attractive to carpenters, whose tools, in many instances, were few and primitive. No one attribute of white pine, probably, so popularized it with our early builders as its ready workability, for they did know, when they built, that

(Text continued on page sixteen)



Porch Detail,
THE CHARLES SHEPARD HOUSE,
SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.



THE CAPTAIN TIMOTHY PHELPS HOUSE, SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.

Built in 1795.



THE CAPTAIN TIMOTHY PHELPS HOUSE, SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.
Entrance Detail. Built in 1795.



KENT-HARMON HOUSE, SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.



EARLY GAMBREL-ROOF HOUSE, SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.

their houses would stand, even without the protection of frequent painting, for hundreds of years.

And, whatever may have been their limitations, they all had the inestimable virtue of simple sincerity. The houses which they built

were homes, the foundation of our country today, and their architecture, because it was a sincere effort toward better things, plays its part in our great national architectural heritage, handed down from the first colonists and the first Americans.



THE THOMAS ARCHER PLACE, SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT.

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